



Sir Lancelot was the bravest and most famous knight in all the world. Far and wide, tales of his exploits had lightened many a long, dark winter's evening. Boys would sit and listen wide-eyed, dreaming of the day when they might accomplish deeds as fine as Sir Lancelot's, slaying dragons and giants in battles that lasted several days and finding ways of combating the evil powers of wicked enchantresses. They also loved to hear of his anger, which was never roused unless the cause was just. But one tale which they did not hear, for those who knew it would repeat it only in whispers, was of Sir Lancelot's love for the fair Queen Guinevere.

Ever since he had first arrived at Camelot, Sir Lancelot had loved the queen. Often he had carried her colours at tournaments and undertaken quests to do her honour. To Sir Lancelot, the queen was the finest woman in the world and he could love no other. King Arthur rejoiced in the devotion Sir Lancelot showed to the queen, for he felt it only right that his best knight should serve his queen. The queen, too, loved Sir Lancelot, yet they both knew that if their love should become common knowledge it would only bring shame, dishonour and sorrow to all.

That winter had been harsh at Camelot and the bad weather had kept Sir Lancelot confined within the castle walls. The snow had fallen so thickly that the knights were not able to venture out, even to hunt. For many months the whole country had been shrouded in a silent white blanket of snow.

Within the castle Sir Lancelot had been seeing the queen in secret and with each day his love for her had grown. Sometimes their eyes met across the hall as the queen sat sewing with her ladies. At other times they would brush by each other when crossing on the stairway. When, at last, spring came, and with it the thaw, Sir Lancelot was determined to leave Camelot. He longed to find some new adventure which would both test his knighthood and take him far from the queen.

The very next day as the knights of the Round Table were seated in the great hall a weary traveller arrived at the castle. Without resting he asked to be taken to King Arthur. Before all the assembled knights he explained the reason for his journey: a young maiden was being held prisoner in a bath of scalding water in the tower of a far-off castle. She had been held there for five years under a powerful spell, because an evil enchantress had thought her too beautiful. He could not say how she had survived so long, but her people now feared for her life.

'Great King, I have made this journey because my fellow countrymen have heard

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that one of your knights surpasses all men in strength, courage and goodness. I beg you, let this knight travel to my country, for he alone can rescue this maiden.'

The traveller's journey had proved too arduous: having made his plea he slumped to the floor, exhausted. The knights ran to his aid, but he was found to be dead.

Everyone present knew which knight he had sought, and all eyes now turned towards Sir Lancelot. Without hesitation he rose to his feet.

'Sire, let this be my quest,' he said. 'I do not know where I shall find this maiden, but I shall ride through the spring rains, the heat of summer and the chill of winter if need be, until I find her. I vow to free her, even if I lose my life in the attempt.'

King Arthur gave his consent, and straight away Sir Lancelot set about making preparations to leave.

Later that evening Lancelot sent his page with a message to the queen's chamber, begging her to see him before he left. He knew that she must come and so he made his way to their secret meeting place.

In the queen's quiet, walled garden, built within the castle and hidden from all prying eyes, Lancelot met Guinevere. She had been weeping. She wrapped her cloak closer around her body. She was not cold but she shivered to think that soon Lancelot, the knight who had loved her and served her so chivalrously, would soon be gone.

The couple moved to sit down on a stone bench. For some time they were silent, listening to the sound of a fountain playing. But when at last they spoke, it was not of their love but of the quest that lay before Lancelot. All too soon it was time for them to return indoors. Lancelot rose and, taking the queen's hand, he kissed it.

'Guinevere, I must leave you because our love can never bring us happiness. If I were to remain here I fear my love for you would drive me mad. But I swear that however long I am gone I shall never cease to love and honour you,' said Lancelot.

'God bless you, Lancelot, and keep you safe,' said the queen. And rising from the bench she crossed the garden to a wooden door set in the wall, unlocked it, passed through the doorway and was gone.

By the next morning all was ready for Lancelot's departure: his armour shone, his refurbished weapons glistened in the morning sunlight and his horse, sensing his master's eagerness to depart, pawed the ground and tossed his head in the air.

As Sir Lancelot rode down from Camelot, King Arthur and Queen Guinevere watched sadly from the castle's battlements, not knowing if they would see this knight again. Sir Lancelot rode onwards, and as he travelled his good spirits were restored, for he was glad to be setting off on a great adventure which would test all his knightly skills. Although he did not know in which land he would find the imprisoned maiden, he felt sure that if he was the knight who could break the spell

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his wanderings would lead him there. For many days he rode over open plains and through thick forests, asking all whom he met where he could find the country of the unhappy maiden. As he journeyed he stopped only to eat berries growing in the hedgerows and to drink water from streams; at night he slept in the open wrapped only in his cloak, his head resting on his helmet.

For many weeks Sir Lancelot journeyed until one night as he slept, huddled against his horse for warmth, he dreamt he had reached a bleak and desolate country where no living thing flourished and all around was devastation. In this dream he thought he passed through this land until he came in sight of a tower which rose starkly above the rocky landscape, perched on top of a steep cliff. As he looked towards the castle the face of a woman appeared, surrounded by fierce red tongues of fire. She called his name and told him to come quickly. Sir Lancelot awoke with a start, knowing that this was the land and the maiden he sought. Immediately he mounted his horse and rode through what remained of the night, and within the very next day's ride found himself in the ravaged land he had seen in his dream. In the distance he caught sight of the same castle and, spurring on his horse, he galloped towards it. As he rode up a group of bedraggled and emaciated retainers came out to greet him. They hailed him as the man who had come to save their mistress, for only the bravest knight would have undertaken this perilous quest.

'Worthy knight,' they cried, 'how long we have waited for you to come!'

Sir Lancelot dismounted and was led to the tower in which the maiden was imprisoned. But the castle-dwellers would on no account enter. Sir Lancelot bounded up the spiral staircase. As he approached the chamber he felt a great heat and saw that all the metalwork on the doors was burning hot. Without a thought for himself, he threw his full weight against the doors, at which the locks shattered, the great bolts fell loose and the doors crumbled to the floor. Great clouds of scalding steam and smoke poured over him, and through this choking, burning fog he saw the red flames dancing beneath the tub in which the maiden lay. His eyes began to stream and holding his hand across his mouth he fumbled his way across the room to the bath. He plunged his hands into the boiling water and lifted out the maiden. Looking at her face, he saw she was the woman who had appeared in his dream.

Sir Lancelot's unselfish and courageous deed had broken the spell and the castle folk ventured into the tower. Attendants rushed forward to dress their lady, speedily wrapping her in warm furs. Once clothed, she turned and thanked the knight who had saved her. Sir Lancelot told her his name and she asked him to come with her to her father's castle so she could reward him for her rescue.

The woman told Sir Lancelot that she was Elaine, daughter of the maimed King Pellès, and that this kingdom was known as the Waste Lands. When Sir Lancelot heard this he knew why the land was so desolate. He had heard tales of a country where the king had received a wound which would not heal. Stranger still, men said that when the king was maimed his kingdom, too, seemed wounded for it had withered and remained barren.

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Arriving at a graveyard, they reined in their horses so that they could go and thank God for the great deed done that day. As they approached the chapel Sir Lancelot's eye was caught by a tomb on which was inscribed, in letters of gold, the words: 'Here shall come a leopard and he shall slay this dragon and in this foreign country he shall beget a lion.' As he read these words the tomb's lid began to rise and out of it seeped thick black smoke. Within seconds the lid had been cast aside and out of the tomb crawled a dragon with jaws which gaped wide to show its great pointed teeth. Its forked tongue spat out long red and yellow flames and it seemed to crawl and writhe endlessly as its breath lit up its ugly, dark-green, horny scales. Tightening the reins on his terrified horse, Sir Lancelot levelled his lance and looked the creature straight in the eye. As his horse reared its forelegs he delivered a powerful thrust full into the dragon's belly. The monster writhed on its back. But the blow had been true and the dragon, raising its head in one last feeble attempt to break the lance, fell back dead.

The air cleared and Lady Elaine came forward. She led Sir Lancelot into the chapel where they both knelt and gave thanks to God.

'Come, we are near my father's castle,' said Elaine. They rode swiftly and soon they came in sight of it.

But this once-great castle stood half in ruins. Not one of its tall towers stood intact and its massive, crumbling walls gave the only clue to its former magnificence.

Entering the only habitable part of the castle, Sir Lancelot was amazed to meet four young men carrying a bier on which lay a pallid and wizened man. He wore no shirt and the lower half of his body was covered with a red velvet cloth. Sir Lancelot started for he saw then the gaping, livid wound in the king's side.

The king welcomed Lancelot, but before he could thank him King Pelles suddenly fell back on to his couch as if exhausted.

At that very moment a white dove flew in by an upper window. In its beak it held a censor of gold and the air was filled with the sweetest, most refreshing perfume. A light breeze rustled through the chamber and a maiden as beautiful as an angel entered. She carried in her hands a gold chalice which was covered by a gleaming white cloth. Holding the cup high in front of her, she crossed the room and passed through the open doors, which closed behind her of their own accord.

King Pelles appeared to find new strength. 'That was the Maiden of the Grail,' he explained, sensing Sir Lancelot's bewilderment. 'The chalice she carries was used by our Saviour at the Last Supper. The cup was brought into this land by my ancestor Joseph of Aramathia and it has been kept here in Castle Carbonek ever since. Soon a knight is to be born who will be worthy to become its earthly guardian. How I long for that time, for when the good knight comes the wound in my side shall be healed and my wasteland restored to life.'

Sir Lancelot could only marvel at the mysteries of this country. So wrapped in wonder was he that he did not notice how closely King Pelles was observing him.

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King Pelles was thinking of a prophecy which a wise man had made many years ago. He had foretold that his daughter Elaine would bear the child of the finest knight in the world, and this child would be destined to become guardian of the Holy Grail. Surely, he thought, the knight now present within his castle was worthy to be father of such a child. Glancing at his daughter, he could see that she loved her rescuer already.

When they all sat down to dine that night Dame Brisene, Elaine's maid, came and stood behind King Pelles' chair. She was regarded throughout the land as the most powerful enchantress, and she told King Pelles quietly how she could make it possible for the prophecy to be fulfilled.

'There are many rumours,' she whispered in King Pelles' ear, 'of Sir Lancelot's love for Queen Guinevere. I can, by my magic crafts, make Lady Elaine appear in the shape of Queen Guinevere and in this guise she can win Sir Lancelot's love.'

King Pelles was troubled by this plan, for it seemed to him base to trick such a chivalrous knight through witchcraft. But he could not forget what wondrous deeds the child of Elaine and Lancelot was destined to achieve. With this in mind he agreed that Dame Brisene should work her magic that very night. And so Lady Elaine retired with Dame Brisene to the enchantress's chamber and the magic spell was cast.

Later that night Sir Lancelot was shown to the guest chamber. A large fire had been lit, filling the room with a warm red glow. Much fatigued, Sir Lancelot lay down beneath the warm covers of the bed and stretched out his tired limbs. Soon he was gently drifting off to sleep. Then he thought he heard the door creaking and, opening his eyes, he saw a shadowy figure enter the room. As the figure walked towards him he saw by the light of the fire that it was a woman. As she moved closer to where Sir Lancelot lay he let out a gasp of amazement: it was Queen Guinevere.

'What magic is this?' he asked in wonder. 'How can you be here? Unless I'm dreaming, answer me, for I must know.' But the figure was silent and would not look at him. He moved to grasp her hand. His fingers touched, and then he dimly saw the ring that Guinevere wore. He was sure that this was indeed the queen, and that she had at last come to love him.

Next morning Sir Lancelot awoke early. He turned in his bed and, horror-struck, he saw the sleeping figure of Elaine by his side. The colour drained from his cheeks and, letting out a dreadful groan, he leapt from the bed. Like a demented beast trapped in a hunter's pit, he tried to find some way of escape. Elaine stirred and awoke to see him pacing the room in distraction.

'What witchcraft . . . ? What power . . . ? What evil has been at work? What wrong have I done?' he moaned. He could explain nothing to himself.

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'Why did you do this to me?' he cried to Elaine. And then she told him of the prophecy.

In a lunatic frenzy Lancelot jumped out of the window and tumbled to the ground, his fall broken only by thorns and brambles which tore into his flesh. Like a wild man he seized an unsaddled horse, mounted it and rode violently away to find some distant place where he could hide his shame.

For many months nothing was heard of Sir Lancelot at Camelot, and when a year had passed all men feared him dead. They grieved much for the loss of the best knight in the world. But his cousin, Sir Bors, was certain that Lancelot was still alive, so he set off in search of Lancelot. At length his journey led him to the wasteland kingdom, where King Pelles told him that Lancelot had at the castle.

'But he is no longer here,' said King Pelles sadly. 'After he came to our land he lost his mind and ran off like a madman into the forest. Since then no man has seen him

but there have been reports of a wild man who roams the forests, and I think that must be Sir Lancelot.'

Now when Sir Bors saw Elaine he noticed that the baby she carried in her arms strongly resembled Sir Lancelot: obviously more had happened in this strange castle than King Pelles was prepared to divulge. Deep in thought, he left to continue his search for Sir Lancelot.

When summer came King Pelles sent his daughter to a distant castle where she might bring up her son, whom she had named Galahad, in peace. Her own home held too many memories for her of Lancelot. She had grown sad after Sir Bors' visit and not even the sight of her little son could cheer her.

Now one day as Elaine and her ladies were playing on the grass beyond the castle walls, one of the ladies threw a ball that they were playing with so hard that it rolled into some trees at the edge of the woods. The lady went to retrieve it, then rushed from the trees in fright.

'Lady, the wild man of the woods is lying dead in the forest,' she explained. 'Let us run away.'

'No,' said Elaine. 'I want to see him.' She walked over to the woods to where the man lay, motionless. The moment she saw him she recognized Sir Lancelot. He was half-starved: his ribs showed through his skin, his cheeks were hollow and his eyes sunken. His flesh was torn and bruised and his hair was long, tangled and grizzled.

Elaine wept to see him but then realized that he was not dead but sleeping. She did not disturb him but immediately rejoined her ladies. 'Quickly,' she ordered, 'fetch men from the castle. This poor man is Sir Lancelot.'

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For several weeks Elaine nursed Lancelot and would let no other person near him. In this time he was restored to health. Once recovered, Lancelot felt it his duty to stay with Elaine and made no attempt to leave the castle. Elaine's life was now filled with happiness, and she even tolerated Lancelot's determination never to look at or ask to see his son Galahad.

News of Lancelot's discovery eventually reached Camelot, and Sir Bors once more set out to find him, bringing with him a horse and armour in case Lancelot should wish to return with him. At length he reached the castle and when Lancelot had talked with Sir Bors about Camelot he knew he could no longer stay with Elaine. Sir Bors also spoke of the queen, rekindling Lancelot's love for her. And so Lancelot returned to Camelot, where everyone welcomed him joyously save the queen, who had heard about Elaine's son. But her coldness soon vanished and she found that she now loved Lancelot with an even greater intensity.

When Elaine had watched Lancelot leave her for a second time she was so grief-stricken that she could not even weep, and before long she grew pale and sick. Then,

as if in a dream, she took her small son Galahad to a convent and entrusted him to the care of the nuns. She returned to the castle and took to her bed. Soon she was near dying and, summoning her ladies, she ordered them that when she was dead they should clothe her body in her richest garments, place it in a barge and let the barge float down the river to Camelot. Finally she wrote a letter which was to be placed in her hands when she died.

In a little while Elaine died, and her ladies sadly followed her instructions. A black-draped barge containing her corpse was set on the river on the edge of the castle grounds, and the gentle current took it on its journey. Where it passed near the bank autumn leaves fell into the boat, burnishing Elaine's body with their fiery colours.

Finally the barge reached Camelot, where everyone came to look at the beautiful woman lying in the boat now lodged against the river bank. The letter was taken from her hands and given to King Arthur. He opened it and read: 'Sir Lancelot, know that Elaine, whom some men thought fair, never ceased to love you. Mourn for me and see me buried and pray for my soul as you are a true knight.'

Sir Lancelot did as charged and mourned for this gentle woman who had loved him in vain. But her death cast a shadow over his life which time was never to erase.